

May 3, 2006: USCIRF Announces Recommendations to Secretary of State Rice on Countries of Particular Concern; Afghanistan Added to Watch List

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Contact:

Anne Johnson, Director of Communications, (202) 523-3240, ext. 27 WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) today announced its 2006 recommendations to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on "countries of particular concern," or CPCs. The 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) requires that the United States designate as CPCs those countries whose governments have engaged in or tolerated systematic and egregious violations of the universal right to freedom of religion or belief. The Commission's recommendations for CPC designation for 2006 are: Burma, Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea), Eritrea, Iran, Pakistan, People's Republic of China, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam. In recommending these countries for CPC designation, the Commission reaffirms its recommendations from 2005. The Commission has also established a Watch List of countries where conditions do not rise to the statutory level requiring CPC designation but which require close monitoring due to the nature and extent of violations of religious freedom engaged in or tolerated by the governments. Afghanistan has been added to the Commission's Watch List this year, joining Bangladesh, Belarus, Cuba, Egypt, Indonesia, and Nigeria. Though not on the Watch List, the Commission is closely monitoring the situations in India, Russia and Sri Lanka, and it continues to be especially concerned about the situation in Iraq. Today the Commission is also releasing its 2006 Annual Report with recommendations on U.S. policy for the President, Secretary of State, and Congress with regard to CPC countries, as well as other countries where the United States can help to promote freedom of religion or belief. The 2006 Annual Report may be found on the Commission's web site at www.uscifr.gov and may also be obtained by contacting the Commission's Communications Department at communications@uscifr.gov (202) 523-3240, ext. 14. The following is the text of the Commission's letter to Secretary Rice with 2006 CPC recommendations:

Dear Secretary Rice: As required by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA), the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has assessed the facts and circumstances regarding violations of religious freedom around the world. Pursuant to our review, we recommend that you designate the following 11 countries as countries of particular concern, or CPCs: Burma, Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea), Eritrea, Iran, Pakistan, People's Republic of China, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam. In IRFA, Congress codified the critical importance of freedom of religion or belief and also made the promotion of this freedom a matter of U.S. law. Congress created the Commission to ensure that the promotion of this fundamental freedom and other freedoms throughout the world would remain an integral part of U.S. foreign policy. One of the Commission's chief responsibilities in the process of promoting religious freedom as required by IRFA is to draw your attention to those countries whose governments have engaged in or tolerated systematic and egregious violations of religious freedom and recommend that they be designated as CPCs. The designation of CPCs not only puts a spotlight on those countries where the most severe violations take place, but also lays the groundwork for important decisions in U.S. relations with these countries. The situations in Afghanistan and Iraq demonstrate that freedom of conscience goes to the heart of our foreign policy goals. In these two countries, where the United States is directly engaged in political reconstruction, the universal right to religious freedom is imperiled. Only two months ago, a man faced execution in Afghanistan for exercising his right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief. Charged with the "crime" of changing his religion, the case against him was eventually dismissed with your urging, but concerns about his personal safety meant that he could no longer stay in Afghanistan. A few months before, an Afghan journalist who is also a Muslim scholar was imprisoned and threatened with death after being found guilty of blasphemy. His purported "crime" was to question the strict interpretation of some tenets of the majority religion in Afghanistan. In Iraq, an escalation in the level of sectarian violence between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims threatens to halt political reconstruction. Targets of religiously motivated attacks also include secular Muslims, non-Muslim minorities, and women. The result is that many non-Muslim minorities are leaving Iraq, an exodus that may mean the end of the presence in Iraq of ancient Christian and other communities that have lived on those same lands for 2,000 years. The situations in Afghanistan and Iraq serve to underscore the precarious state of this fundamental freedom, which the President's National Security Strategy refers to as the "first freedom," in so many countries around the world today.

Re-Designation of Severe Religious Freedom Violators In September 2005, you re-designated Saudi Arabia, China, North Korea, Sudan, Iran, Vietnam, Eritrea, and Burma as CPCs. The Commission concludes that there have been no changes substantial enough to warrant the removal of these eight countries from the list of CPC designations. - Despite the Department's contention in its 2005 religious freedom report that there were some slight improvements in Saudi government efforts to foster religious tolerance in Saudi society, the report again concluded that freedom of religion "does not exist" in Saudi Arabia. The Commission also finds that there is no religious freedom in Saudi Arabia. The government of Saudi Arabia persists in banning all forms of public religious expression other than that of the government's own interpretation of one school of Sunni Islam and forcefully represses private religious practice. The government also continues to be involved in financing activities throughout the world that support extreme religious intolerance, hatred, and, in some cases, violence toward non-Muslims and disfavored Muslims. In China, where the Commission made its first official visit last year, the government continues to be responsible for pervasive and severe violations of religious freedom and related human rights. Every religious community in China is subject to serious restrictions, state control, and repression. The most severe religious freedom abuses are directed against Tibetan Buddhists, Uighur Muslims, Roman Catholics, house church and

unregistered Protestants, and spiritual groups such as the Falun Gong-abuses involving imprisonment, torture, and other forms of ill treatment. Though the Chinese government issued a new Ordinance on Religion in March 2005, its provisions, in fact, restrict rather than protect religious freedom, offering Party leaders more extensive control over all religious groups and their activities. Prominent religious leaders and others continue to be confined, imprisoned, tortured, "disappeared," and subjected to other forms of ill treatment on account of their religion or belief. What is more, the Chinese government, in its treatment of refugees from North Korea, continues to disregard its international obligations to protect those who face persecution on their return. For more information on all of these concerns, we respectfully refer you to our Policy Focus on China, which the Commission issued after its visit to China last year. There are virtually no personal freedoms in North Korea and no protections for universal human rights. As confirmed by the Commission's important study released last year and based on interviews with North Korean refugees, religious belief of any kind is viewed by the government as a potential competitor to the forcefully propagated cult of personality centered on Kim Jong Il and his late father, Kim Il Sung. In pursuit of absolute control of all facets of life, the government under dictator Kim Jong Il has created an environment of fear in which dissent of any kind is not tolerated. Freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief does not exist, as the government severely represses public and private religious activities and maintains a policy of tight control over government-sanctioned religious practice. In the past several years, North Korean government officials have arrested, imprisoned, tortured, and sometimes executed those discovered engaging in clandestine religious activity. In Sudan, which the Commission visited earlier this year, an authoritarian government-that has pursued coercive policies of Arabization and Islamization resulting in genocide-severely restricts the religious freedom and other universal human rights of an ethnically and religiously diverse population. Sudanese security forces, and the senior officials responsible for their actions, have not been held to account for the human rights abuses committed during Sudan's North-South Civil War, most of the victims of which were Christians or followers of traditional African religions. With the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in January 2005, religious freedom conditions have improved in southern and central Sudan. However, during its trip to Sudan, the Commission found that peace in Sudan is very fragile and there are serious problems with implementing the CPA, including its arrangements for the protection of human rights. The CPA has not yet resulted in significant changes in practice in government-controlled areas of the North, where government agencies continue to harass and discriminate against non-Muslims, including Christians, as well as Muslims who dissent from the government's views. In prisons and vagrant camps, non-Muslims are pressured to convert to Islam. Apostasy is legally punishable by death. Permission to build churches is routinely denied. The government's actions with regard to the continuing genocide in Darfur, as well as its failure to cooperate with the Security Council-mandated investigation by the International Criminal Court of alleged war crimes, impugn the commitment of Sudanese leaders to support human rights guarantees. What is more, at least some elements in the Sudanese military or security services that remain in the South may be aiding the Lord's Resistance Army, a Ugandan rebel group notorious for its brutal human rights abuses and known to have received safe haven and other support from Khartoum in the past. The government of Iran engages in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, including prolonged detention, torture, and executions. Over the past year, the Iranian government's poor religious freedom record deteriorated, especially for religious minorities and for Baha'is and Jews in particular. All minority groups faced intensified harassment, detention, arrests, and imprisonment. A consistent stream of virulent and inflammatory statements by political and religious leaders and an increase in harassment and, in some cases, imprisonment of, and physical attacks against, members of such groups indicate a renewal of a level of oppression not seen since the years after the 1979 revolution. President Ahmadinejad's repeated threats to destroy Israel and denials of the Holocaust have intensified fears among Iran's Jewish community. Dissidents and political reformers continue to be imprisoned on criminal charges of blasphemy and for criticizing the nature of the Islamic regime. The government of Vietnam continues to harass, detain, imprison, and discriminate against leaders and practitioners of all religious communities. In response to its designation as a CPC, the Vietnamese government has released a number of prominent religious prisoners, re-opened some churches in the Central Highlands, officially outlawed forced renunciations of faith, and issued new guidelines to help speed the process of registration of religious congregations. Nevertheless, serious abuses of religious freedom continue to occur, particularly against Montagnard and Hmong Protestants, Vietnamese Mennonites, followers of Hoa Hao Buddhism, and leaders of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam. In addition, reports of forced renunciation of faith continue to emerge, the number of religious venues re-opened is low relative to the number that were closed, and new detentions continue to occur. Religious freedom conditions deteriorated in the past year in Eritrea, where the government continues to engage in systematic and egregious religious freedom violations. These violations include: a prolonged ban on public activities by all religious groups that are not officially recognized; closure of places of worship; inordinate delays in acting on registration applications by religious groups; disruption of private religious and even social gatherings of members of unregistered groups; arbitrary arrests and detention without charge of their members; and the mistreatment or torture of religious detainees, sometimes resulting in death. Hundreds of members of unregistered churches are believed to be detained at any given time, typically without charges, even for extended periods. Serious human rights abuses perpetuated by the military regime in Burma continue to be widespread, including systematic and egregious violations of religious freedom. According to the State Department, the Burmese government's extremely poor human rights record deteriorated in the past year, with increasing hostility directed at ethnic minorities, democracy activists, and international humanitarian agencies. The military junta uses a pervasive internal security apparatus to monitor the activities of all religious organizations. The government imposes restrictions on certain religious practices, controls and censors all religious publications, has supported, allowed, or instigated violence against religious minorities, and, in some areas of the country, has forcefully promoted Buddhism over other religions. Ethnic minority Christians and Muslims have encountered severe difficulties in recent years. IRFA requires that the President not only name those countries that are the most egregious violators of religious freedom, but also take specific policy actions

in response to that CPC designation. By taking action, the U.S. government demonstrates that its words about promoting democracy and freedom are put into practice. Last year, the State Department announced its decisions on three serious religious freedom violators, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, and Eritrea, in fulfillment of statutory obligations outlined in IRFA. In September 2005, you announced the denial of commercial export to Eritrea of defense articles and services covered by the Arms Control Export Act, with some items exempted. This was the first unique presidential action to be undertaken under IRFA as a result of CPC designation. The Commission commended this action and has recommended subsequent actions that the Administration should take, in accordance with IRFA, in response to the designation of Eritrea. In May of last year, the Department of State announced it had reached a binding agreement with the government of Vietnam, in accordance with IRFA, on steps that government would take to improve religious freedom. The Department also said that the U.S. government would consider taking Vietnam off the CPC list if certain conditions are met. It is the Commission's view that Vietnam's record on fulfilling this agreement has been mixed at best. As noted above, there has clearly not yet been enough tangible progress on religious freedom concerns in Vietnam to warrant removal of the CPC designation. In September 2005, one year after the designation of Saudi Arabia, you approved a temporary 180-day waiver of further action, following the CPC designation, to allow for continued diplomatic discussions with the Saudi government and "to further the purposes of the International Religious Freedom Act." The waiver expired in late March 2006. As of the date of this letter, no action with regard to Saudi Arabia has been announced by the U.S. government. Given the extent of religious freedom violations in Saudi Arabia, the Commission urges you to consult with Congress and other parts of the U.S. government, including the Commission, during your discussions with the Saudis, and to make any agreement reached with the Saudi government public in the interest of the accountability that results from transparency. Since religious freedom conditions in Saudi Arabia have not substantially improved in the last year, the U.S. government must not hesitate in taking aggressive action which meets the requirements of IRFA to demonstrate that it will not disregard the persistent and egregious religious freedom violations committed by the Saudi government. Countries that Should be Added to the CPC List In addition to the eight countries previously designated by you as CPCs, the Commission continues to find that the governments of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Pakistan have engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom, and recommends that they be designated as CPCs this year. The overall situation for human rights in Uzbekistan deteriorated in the past year, particularly after the events in Andijon last May, when government troops fired on a crowd of demonstrators, killing hundreds. In addition to a restrictive law on religion that severely limits the ability of religious communities to function in Uzbekistan, the Uzbek government continues to exercise a high degree of control over the manner in which the Islamic faith is practiced. Government authorities also continue to crack down harshly on Muslim individuals, groups, and mosques that do not conform to government-prescribed practices or that the government claims are associated with extremist political groups. This has resulted in the imprisonment of thousands of persons in recent years, most of whom are denied the right to due process, and there are credible reports that many of those arrested continue to be tortured or beaten in detention. Though security threats do exist in Uzbekistan, including from members of Hizb ut-Tahrir and other groups that claim a religious linkage, these threats do not excuse or justify the scope and harshness of the government's ill treatment of religious believers. The Commission's CPC recommendation for Uzbekistan should not in any way be construed as an exculpatory defense of Hizb ut-Tahrir, an extremist and highly intolerant organization that promotes hatred of moderate Muslims, the West, Jews, and others. President Saparmurat Niyazov's monopoly of power and absolute control over Turkmen society render any independent religious activity impossible in Turkmenistan. The president is also imposing an increasingly oppressive personality cult, now effectively a state-imposed religion, that impinges on all aspects of public life in the country. Even the majority Muslim community faces repression. In July 2005, Niyazov ordered the publication of a list of religious rituals common to all Turkmen. It is reported that secret police attend mosques to identify Muslims who perform religious rites in a way that differs from this officially prescribed Turkmen practice. In the past two years, the government has made small, purportedly positive legal adjustments to the laws that restrict religious practice; however, these changes have done little or nothing to alter the overall repressive situation. The decree on registration cited in the 2005 International Religious Freedom Report as evidence of "improvement" in fact resulted in the registration of only nine small groups and even they report continued difficulties. Credible reports indicate that registration is becoming a method of more pervasive state control over religious communities. The Commission regrets that a few insignificant developments in Turkmenistan that in no way change the fundamental absence there of any freedoms, including religious freedom, enable that country to evade the State Department's designation as a CPC it so unequivocally deserves. Sectarian and religiously motivated violence persists in Pakistan, particularly against Shi'as, Ahmadis, Hindus, and Christians, and the government's response to this problem, though improved, continues to be insufficient and not fully effective. In addition, a number of the country's laws, including legislation restricting the Ahmadi community and laws against blasphemy, frequently result in imprisonment on account of religion or belief and/or vigilante violence against the accused. These religious freedom concerns persist amidst the wider problem of the lack of democracy in Pakistan, an obstacle the current government has done little to address. The absence of any meaningful democratic reform has been exacerbated by the current government's political alliance with militant religious parties, which has served to strengthen these groups and give them influence in the country's affairs disproportionate to their support among the Pakistani people. Given the importance of Pakistan in the U.S. government's efforts against terrorism, the failure of the Pakistani government to implement genuine religious freedom reforms is a cause for serious concern. Countries Requiring Close Monitoring: the Commission's Watch List In addition to its CPC recommendations, the Commission has established a Watch List of countries where conditions do not rise to the statutory level requiring CPC designation but which require close monitoring due to the nature and extent of violations of religious freedom engaged in or tolerated by the governments. Afghanistan, where the former Taliban regime was once designated under IRFA as a particularly severe violator, has been added to the Commission's Watch List this year, joining Bangladesh, Belarus, Cuba, Egypt, Indonesia, and Nigeria. The Commission is concerned

about the serious abuses in these countries, and that the governments either have not halted repression and/or violence against persons amounting to severe violations of freedom of religion, or have failed to punish those responsible for perpetrating those acts. We urge you to pay particular attention to the poor situation for religious freedom in these countries, as we will continue to do. Though improved since the fall of the Taliban regime, conditions for freedom of religion or belief in Afghanistan became increasingly problematic in the past year. Flaws in the country's new constitution, which does not contain clear protections for the right to freedom of religion or belief for individual Afghan citizens, resulted in a growing number of criminal prosecutions and other official actions against individuals for exercising their rights—including cases we noted at the opening of this letter. The defects in the constitution are compounded by the current role and power of the country's Supreme Court, which continues to be headed by a Chief Justice who disavowed to the Commission his support for core international human rights standards. As a consequence of his actions, a sitting Minister in the interim Afghan government was forced to resign after being charged with blasphemy for questioning the role of Islamic law in Afghanistan, journalists have been jailed on charges of offending Islam, and during the October 2004 presidential elections, a presidential candidate was threatened with disqualification for purported "anti-Islamic remarks" on women's rights and family law. In addition, the failure or inability of the Afghan government to exercise authority over much of the country outside Kabul contributes to a progressively deteriorating situation for religious freedom and other human rights in many of the provinces. These developments indicate that religious extremism—even in official circles—is an increasing threat to democratic consolidation in Afghanistan. In light of the very real dangers to the U.S. goal of instituting democracy and human rights protections in Afghanistan, the Commission has decided to place the country on its Watch List. The Commission will carefully monitor the situation in Afghanistan, in whose political development the United States should remain closely engaged. In Bangladesh, where the Commission traveled in March 2006, there is concern that democratic institutions and constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion continue to be threatened by the growth of religious extremism amid the country's chronic political strife. Islamic militants have been implicated in violent attacks on politicians, members of religious minorities, particularly Ahmadis, Hindus, and Christians, authors who promote different interpretations of Islam, and non-governmental institutions promoting the empowerment of women and human rights. There has been a dramatic and marked decline of the Hindu population living in Bangladesh during the past few decades. There is also concern that the next national elections in 2007 might result in the kind of violence seen following the 2001 elections, when Hindus were particularly subjected to attacks, and that religious minorities are currently being targeted for disenfranchisement from participation in those elections by selective voter registration procedures. Although the perpetrators of these crimes have largely gone unpunished, the Commission notes that the government's efforts to combat extremist violence have had some notable successes in the past year, including the arrests of two militant leaders, Siddiqui Islam, better known as "Bangla Bhai," and Sheikh Abdur Rahman. In Belarus, violence after the March 2006 presidential elections has resulted in a deteriorating situation for all human rights. The highly authoritarian government persists in enforcing the harsh 2002 law on religion, resulting in calculated and serious regulatory obstacles and bureaucratic and legal restrictions on the activities of many religious communities. In the past year, the Belarusian authorities appeared to be adopting even tougher sanctions against religious leaders and others who take part in unregistered religious activity. Moreover, the government refuses to acknowledge anti-Semitism and does not prosecute those responsible for vandalism against Jewish memorials, cemeteries, or other property. Anti-Semitic literature continues to be sold in government buildings, in stores, and at events directly and indirectly connected with the Belarusian Orthodox Church. Religious belief and practice continue to be tightly controlled in Cuba, where the government rarely permits the construction of new places of worship. A new law on religion, adopted last year and meant to "legalize" certain religious activity, actually reinforces the government's efforts to maintain control over religious practice. Reports indicate that at least three Protestant house churches have been closed, confiscated, and/or demolished since the new law went into effect. In the past year, both registered and unregistered religious groups continued to experience varying degrees of official interference, harassment, and repression. The Commission traveled to Egypt in 2004 and found that discrimination, intolerance, and other human rights violations affect a broad spectrum of religious groups in that country. Serious violations affect Coptic Orthodox Christians, Jews, and Baha'is, as well as members of minority Muslim communities. The Egyptian government has adopted some measures in recent years to acknowledge certain aspects of the religious pluralism in Egyptian society; however, more can and should be done by the government to protect the right to religious freedom, to punish those responsible for a rise in religiously-motivated violence over the past year, and to combat widespread and virulent anti-Semitism and other intolerance in the media and in the education system. Just last month, three Coptic Christian churches were attacked by a Muslim man, resulting in the death of one Christian and the wounding of approximately a dozen others. Three days of rioting followed the attacks, leaving one Muslim killed and almost 40 injured. In Indonesia, though the situation has continued to improve since 2002, the Commission remains concerned about ongoing sectarian violence and the Indonesian government's inability or unwillingness to hold those responsible to account; the forcible closures of worship buildings belonging to religious minorities; and the growing political power and influence of religious extremists, who harass and sometimes instigate violence against moderate Muslim leaders and members of religious minorities. In the past year, a Hindu temple was bombed in Central Sulawesi and mobs attacked an Ahmadiyah compound in West Java several times. Despite some improvement in the past year, including more decisive government action to quell sectarian violence and address the activities of Islamic extremist groups, the response of the government of Nigeria to persistent religious freedom concerns continues to be inadequate. This is particularly the case with regard to an ongoing series of violent communal conflicts along religious lines; the controversy over the expansion of sharia (Islamic law) into the criminal codes of several northern Nigerian states; and discrimination against minority communities of Christians and Muslims. Iraq: Intensified U.S. Efforts Required Although the country does not yet appear on either our recommended CPC list or Watch List as it is undergoing reconstruction, we would like to point to the religious freedom situation in Iraq, a country that continues to be

an important focus of the Commission's work. The development of a permanent constitution and legal system that will guarantee every Iraqi citizen's right to freedom of religion or belief and other human rights in accordance with Iraq's international obligations continues to be a concern. As it now stands, fundamental questions remain about the final content of the constitution, and how the provisions on religious freedom and other fundamental rights will be implemented through enabling legislation. Specifically, the Commission remains troubled by the constitution's overarching ambiguities and contradictions, and particularly by references to Islam which ultimately may be interpreted to negate such key human rights guarantees and to discriminate against and repress both non-Muslims and non-conforming Muslims alike. The result is that human rights, including religious freedom, continue to be at risk. There has been an ongoing stream of violence and extremism in Iraq driven by religious intolerance. We have already mentioned the violence between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims and the flight of thousands of ChaldoAssyrians and other members of Iraq's indigenous non-Muslim religious minorities out of fear of persecution. In addition, there have been numerous reports of violence, including murder, particularly against women, in an effort by various militia and insurgent groups and even, in some areas, local officials, to impose an extremist version of Islamic law in parts of the country. Places of worship and religious clerics continue to be the target of attacks by insurgents and extremist groups. Other Countries Under Scrutiny Finally, though not currently on the Commission's Watch List, the Commission continues actively to monitor the religious freedom conditions in several other countries. In Russia, the deliberate retreat by the government from democratic reform and protection for human rights is an alarming development. The favored status of the Russian Orthodox Church has increasingly affected the right to freedom of religion or belief in Russia. The law on religious organizations has prevented some religious groups from registering and thus practicing freely. Substantial manifestations of anti-Semitism have not declined, while the number of attacks on Muslims and members of other religious and ethnic minorities has increased at a troubling rate. The deterioration in conditions for religious freedom and other human rights appears to be a direct consequence of the increasingly authoritarian nature of the Russian government, and the growing influence of chauvinistic strains in Russian society, which seem to be tolerated by the government. Significant developments affecting freedom of religion or belief that took place in India since the May 2004 elections resulted in that country's removal from the Commission's CPC list last year. Those elections, which resulted in a coalition government led by the Congress Party, followed more than a decade of growing violence against religious minorities in the country and the killing of as many as 2,000 Muslims in the state of Gujarat in 2002. Since then, the country's Supreme Court has taken significant steps to bring to justice those responsible for the violence in Gujarat, including by setting up an inquiry committee in February 2006 that resulted in the reopening of nearly 1,600 cases against those who took part in the attacks. School textbooks that had been revised and published under the previous government of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) were replaced in 2005. In addition, the government has continued to act decisively in several volatile situations in the past year to prevent communal violence in circumstances where it has erupted in the past, most notably following the bombings in the Hindu holy city of Varanasi in early 2006, reportedly carried out by Islamist extremist groups. Despite these improvements, concerns about religious freedom in India remain, particularly indications that attacks on Christian churches and individuals persist-in some areas at alarmingly high levels-without adequate prosecution. The BJP-led state of Rajasthan in particular has been the recent scene of serious attacks on Christian individuals and institutions carried out by members of extremist groups espousing Hindu nationalism. The Commission visited Sri Lanka earlier this year. Although the country is a functioning democracy, the Commission was concerned by the increasing number of attacks targeting religious minority communities, including churches and ministers, as well as by proposed legislation restricting religious conversion that, if enacted, would have resulted in violations of freedom of religion or belief in Sri Lanka. The proposed legislation on religious conversions was deferred at the end of last year, although it can be reintroduced at any time. The Commission remains very concerned about the attacks against churches and religious leaders, which have persisted, and to which the government's response continues to be inadequate.*

*Summaries of conditions in all of the countries discussed in this letter can be found in the Annual Report, which we have enclosed and which will be released concurrently with this letter. The Commission has made specific policy recommendations on most of these countries, and we encourage you to give special attention to those recommendations, which can also be found in our report. We also urge the Department of State to take any actions necessary to implement the IRFA legislation. Madame Secretary, last March, you said, "There is no more fundamental issue for the United States than freedom of religion and religious conscience. This country was founded on that basis and it is at the heart of democracy." The members of the Commission fully concur with your affirmation of this human freedom, so essential to any individual's ability to enjoy the other rights guaranteed in the world's international human rights documents. Indeed, this principle is at the heart of the International Religious Freedom Act. In standing with those who face repression on account of their beliefs, the United States promotes democracy and stability at the same time that it advances the critical agenda of promoting universal human rights for all. The Commission looks forward to meeting with you to discuss its 2006 CPC recommendations. Respectfully yours, Michael Cromartie

Chair

Michael Cromartie, Chair

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